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An Original Short Story

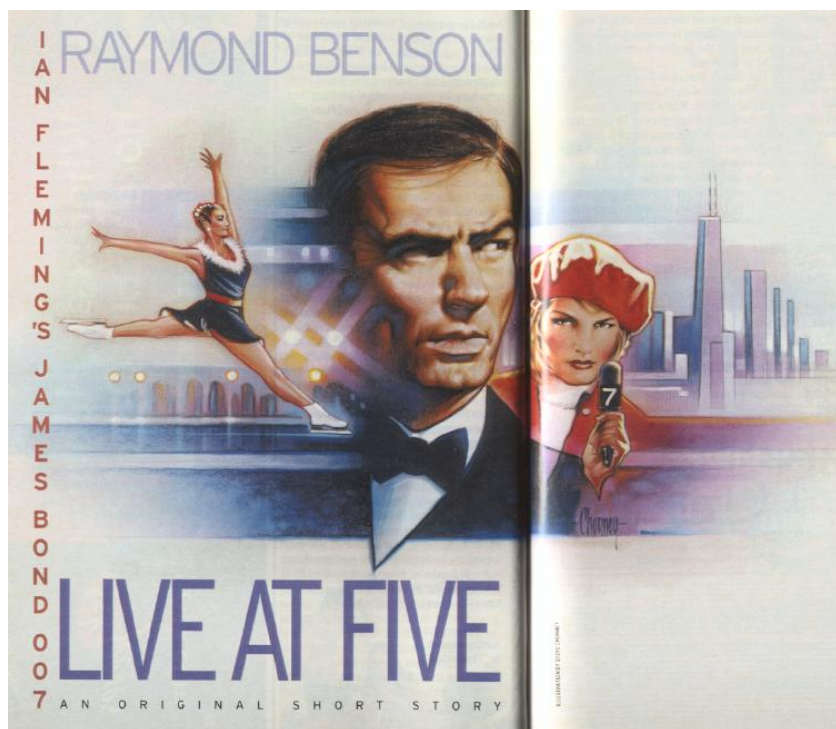
Ian Fleming's James Bond 007

by Raymond Benson

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LIVE AT FIVE

It had been several years since he had seen her. James Bond was surprised and happy to hear that she was in London. They agreed to meet at the bar in the Ritz Hotel, where she was staying. As he got into the decommissioned Aston Martin DB5 he had purchased from Q Branch several years ago, Bond thought again of her long, muscular legs and hour-glass figure. This was one case in which he sided with the media: She was among the worlds most photogenic women. Bond was never one to wallow in nostalgia, but the promise of the rendezvous had awakened memories of passionate kisses and warm, soft skin.

As he drove from Chelsea toward Piccadilly, yet another catalyst sparked a remembrance from the past. He noticed a billboard

announcing a figure-skating "extravaganza" to be held at the Wembley Arena. Natalia Lustokov, the former Russian Olympic skater was the star attraction. Bond smiled and thought of the day when he had first met Natalia.

It was the only time Bond had appeared on television. It was some years back, before the collapse of the Soviet Union, when one of 007's routine assignments was to assist with defections. Usually, Bond's work with defectors was carried out quietly and without any significant incidents.

In that particular instance it had been rather different. . . .



Bond pulled the wool cap over his dark hair and wrapped the scarf tightly around his neck. The snow was tapering off, but the wind blasting off of Lake Michigan still managed to penetrate the heavy coat. They didn't rail Chicago the Windy City for nothing.

He watched as Natalia Lustokov performed an edge jump, in which a skater was suddenly airborne, and one was left wondering how she got there. Wearing tight-fitting leotards and a fur-lined top, the Olympic skater spun around and skated quickly around the rink to where three men were standing behind the rail. One was a heavysset man with bushy eyebrows who barked instructions at her with a demeaning air of superiority. Bond knew that he was Natalia's coach, and that he was just as dangerous as the two bodyguards at his side.

Word had apparently got out that Natalia was practicing on the rink located at the northern end of Grant Park and built over a parking garage near the lakefront. Two hundred spectators had gathered around the plaza, which was scenically located between the lake to the east and the skyline looming overhead to the west.

The skater was on a world tour as part of a cultural-exchange program with the U.S.S.R. When MI6 had learned that she wanted to defect to Britain, Sir Miles Messervy, the man known M, coordinated the operation with the CIA and FBI after an initial attempt in London had been aborted. Her entourage had already flown to the States before MI6 could try again. Bond had been dispatched to America, as M felt that the job needed someone with his particular brand of expertise.

Bond bent down, laced his boots tightly and ran a gloved

finger along the Wilson Hans Gerschwiler blades. He glanced up and saw that the few other civilian skaters on the rink were giving Natalia plenty of room to maneuver. After all, she was a star.

He moved around the railing and stepped onto the ice, then pushed off and sailed smoothly to the center of the rink. While he had always been an expert skier, Bond was the first to admit that he was only an adequate skater. He enjoyed the sport, but he was no master of it.

The truck from WLS Channel 7 television pulled up onto the snow just off Randolph Street, right on time. The reporter, a tall blue-eyed woman with blonde hair and dressed in a bright red wool coat and beret, jumped out of the back, followed by a cameraman carrying a Sony Ikegami camera and an audio man with a recorder box. They hurried to positions at the side of the rink, where the reporter quickly composed herself. Listening to instructions from her producer with an IFB earpiece, she tested the stick mike and rolled smoothly into action.

"This is Janet Davies with Eyewitness News, 'Live at Five' from Daley Bicentennial Plaza where Olympic skater Natalia Lustokov is practicing for her performance tonight."



Natalia, now aware of the television camera, pushed away from the men and skated around the rink gaining enough momentum to turn herself backward and perform a flawless axel. She landed still gliding backward, as the spectators applauded and cheered.

Bond skated around the periphery, moving with the six or seven other skaters who would one day claim that they had shared the rink with Natalia Lustokov. He glanced at the short administrative building overlooking the rink and spotted Max, the FBI man he had met earlier, standing behind the rail. Max nodded at him with a small gesture to his left. Three city policemen had arrived and were mingling with the spectators, near the television crew.

That was Bond's cue. He sped up, overtaking the other skaters and moving behind Natalia.

Jan Davies continued her broadcast. "The snow is leveling off now, but the wind is still strong. That didn't stop the spectators from gathering here to watch Natalia Lustokov strut her stuff. I believe she just did a 'toe loop,' one of the easier multirotation jumps for skaters to perform."

Bond increased his stride and was soon skating beside the girl. He turned to look at her and admired her classic, glamorous features. She had shoulder-length black hair that whipped around her ivory—white face. Her clear blue eyes were large and cat-like, and she had a sensual mouth painted brightly with red lipstick. Her cheekbones were high and her neck was long, and she moved with the gracefulness of a gazelle.

She turned and looked at him, impressed that he would have the gall to attempt to share the spotlight with her in front of a television camera and an audience. Bond smiled at her, then made a sharp turn, daring her to follow him. Natalia accepted the challenge and chased him, quickly overtaking this handsome stranger who had cold blue eyes and a somewhat cruel smile.

"It appears Miss Lustokov has some competition on the rink," the reporter said. When the camera pulled away from her, she mimed to the audio man, "Who is that guy?" Her colleague shrugged.

Bond turned to face Natalia, skating backward. He held out his hands, inviting her to take them. She smiled, nodded and grasped hold. Without saying a word, the couple skated around the rink, face to face. As Bond pulled her along, the three Russians stepped forward, closer to the rail. Who was this man? The coach grunted at one of the bodyguards, a big man wearing a gray fur cap with a red star emblazoned on the front. He quickly donned boots and skates.

Janet Davies continued her commentary. "It appears that Natalia has gained a partner on the rink. We don't know who he is, but he's holding his own with the champion."

The bodyguard finished lacing his boots, then stepped onto the ice. He shoved off and began to skate, some what unsteadily, around the rink behind the couple.

Bond signaled Natalia, indicating that he was willing to help her with a pair throw. Using a partner, a skater could jump higher and more effortlessly with a throw assist. She scooped with her leg and leaped. Bond swung her around so that she landed smoothly in front of him and continued skating. The audience went wild.

"A perfect salchow!" Miss Davies called into the mike. "What a treat we're getting today at Grant Park."

The bodyguard skated closer behind Bond, who saw him out of the corner of his eye. Bond kept him just short of his blind spot for another lap, and then he made his move. Bond turned sharply and slammed directly into the large man, knocking him back on the ice. The man landed with a thud and slid comically toward the edge of the rink. The audience gasped.

Janet Davies whispered to the cameraman. "He did that on purpose, didn't he?" She listened intently to the producer in her ear.

The big man struggled to his feet as the second bodyguard rushed to put on boots and skates. The first man was now angry, and he took off after Bond with more confidence and determination. Meanwhile, Natalia kept skating and spinning, oblivious to the drama unfolding around her.

The first bodyguard skated behind Bond and attempted to smash into his back, but Bond deftly swerved out off the way. The bodyguard missed Bond completely and slid into the second man, who had just entered the rink. They both crumbled into a pile.

Now the spectators were laughing and applauding. It was some kind of show! This was all rehearsed!

The coach, however, was not amused. He immediately began to put on his skates.

Bond sailed past Natalia, winked at her, then skated quickly around to where the two big men were getting back on their feet. Bond skated smoothly between them, grabbing their waists as he glided through. He pulled them hard, then let go, causing them to crash into each and to fall to the ice once again.

As Bond had hoped, the television camera turned away from Natalia and focused on him. The "show" was turning out to be much more entertaining than Natalia's practice.

The coach entered the rink and skated like a pro. He zoomed around his two men and took off after Bond. It was then that everyone noticed the glint of metal in his hand.

"Oh, my God, he's got a gun!" Janet Davies announced into the mike.

Suddenly, the three policemen went into action. They were not wearing skates, but they ran out onto the ice anyway. One of them slipped and slid into the two bodyguards, knocking them over once again. The other two policemen shouted for the coach to halt.

Bond was ahead of them. He crouched, like a skier, turned and skated straight for the coach. The gun fired but the bullet whisked over Bond's head. Bond rammed hard into the coach's belly, knocking him to the ice.

At the sound of the gunshot, the spectators screamed and began to panic.

"A shot was fired!" the reporter shouted. "The rink is turning into chaos!"

Bond fell on top of the coach and wrestled the gun away from him. By then, the policemen had drawn their weapons and were pointing them at the four men lying in the rink. The three Russians raised their hands, and Bond resignedly did so as well.

Once they were on their feet, the coach looked around for the Olympic champion. He shouted frantically in Russian, his face contorted in horror.

Jan Davies was confused as well. "I don't see Natalia Lustokov. . . . What happened to her?"

Indeed, she was nowhere to be seen. She had disappeared into the crowd.

As the police led Bond and the three Russians away, 007 turned back to see that Max was no longer in his position, either. The diversion had worked. The FBI had spirited the skater away, down into the parking garage, where an armored vehicle had been waiting to take her to freedom.

Two Hours later Bond was released, as planned, while the three Russians were held for more paperwork than was necessary. He joined his FBI colleagues and Natalia Lustokov at a safe house located in the Chicago Loop, where Janet Davies's television broadcast was being replayed.

"You put on quite a show, Mr. Bond," Max said. "The most fun I've had since Holiday on Ice."

Bond allowed himself a smile as he watched the antics on the television. . . .



The following three nights in Chicago had been intense. Even now, years later, he was still reflecting on the warmth in her blue eyes as he arrived at the Ritz Hotel for his rendezvous.

After parking his car, Bond bounded into the lobby and entered the bar. He looked around for his date and found her sitting alone in the corner, nursing a glass of wine.

"Is this seat taken?" Bond asked indicating the empty chair beside her.

"Hello, my darling," Janet Davies said dreamily. "It's been a long time."